

The Theological Evolution of the Wesley-Law Relationship: From Mentorship to Polemic

The religious landscape of eighteenth-century England was defined by a tension between the formalist structures of the Established Church and a burgeoning desire for experiential piety. At the center of this intellectual and spiritual ferment stood two of the most influential figures of the age: John Wesley, the pragmatist and architect of Methodism, and William Law, the non-juror priest and mystical theologian. Their relationship, which began in the late 1720s as one of profound mentorship, eventually devolved into a public and theological breach that highlighted fundamental disagreements regarding the nature of salvation, the character of God, and the role of mysticism in the Christian life.¹ This transformation was not merely a personal falling out but represented a significant shift in the development of Methodist soteriology and a definitive rejection of the speculative Behmenist philosophy that came to dominate the later years of William Law.⁴

Historical Verification of the Relationship and Initial Endorsement

The relationship between John Wesley and William Law is an exceptionally well-documented historical fact, verified through personal diaries, extensive correspondence, and the published journals of both men and their contemporaries.² Wesley's initial encounter with Law's writings occurred during a critical period of spiritual transition. In 1725, after being ordained a deacon, Wesley began to focus on "practical divinity" at the suggestion of his mother, Susanna Wesley.¹ While he was already reading spiritual classics such as Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* and Jeremy Taylor's *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, it was William Law's *A Practical Treatise upon Christian Perfection* (1726) and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) that provided the specific ethical and disciplinary framework Wesley was seeking.²

Evidence from Wesley's diaries suggests that he began reading Law around 1730, although Wesley himself would later mistakenly recall the date as 1727 in some of his retrospective writings.² Regardless of the exact year, the impact was immediate and profound. Law's *Serious Call* challenged the spiritually dry and intellectual Christianity of the Georgian era by advocating for a life completely centered on God through systematic prayer, self-denial, and service to the poor.¹¹ Wesley noted that these works "convinced me more than ever of the absolute impossibility of being half a Christian".⁷

Chronology of Major Interactions and Theological Shifts

Year	Event	Descriptive Significance
1726	Publication of <i>Christian Perfection</i>	Law establishes himself as a leading voice in Anglican holy living. ³
1728	Publication of <i>A Serious Call</i>	Law provides the "Methodist" blueprint for discipline and total devotion. ¹
1729	Formation of the Holy Club	Charles and John Wesley begin implementing Law's principles at Oxford. ¹⁵
1732	First Personal Visit	John Wesley visits Law at Putney; Law becomes his spiritual mentor. ²
1735	The Georgia Mission	Wesley travels to America using Law's works as primary devotional textbooks. ¹⁴
1738	The Aldersgate Experience	Wesley experiences evangelical conversion; rejects Law's soteriology. ²
1738	Formal Breach (May)	Wesley and Law exchange four letters of theological dispute. ⁶
1749	<i>The Spirit of Prayer</i>	Law publicly embraces the mysticism of Jacob Boehme. ⁶
1756	Open Letter to Law	Wesley publishes a comprehensive polemic against Law's Behmenism. ⁶
1780	<i>Thoughts upon Jacob</i>	Wesley republishes his

	<i>Behmen</i>	critiques to warn Methodists of mystical errors. ⁴
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The Role of Law as the "Oracle" of Oxford Methodism

Between 1729 and 1735, William Law served as the de facto "oracle" and "parent" of the Oxford Methodists.¹⁴ Wesley regularly sought Law’s personal counsel, visiting him at Putney on multiple occasions.² During these visits, Law introduced Wesley to a broader range of mystical literature, including the *Theologia Germanica* and the works of Johannes Tauler.⁸ At this stage, Wesley’s theology was defined by "will-mysticism"—a belief that holiness could be achieved through the rigorous application of the human will to divine precepts.³

Law’s influence on the early Methodists was not merely theoretical; it dictated their daily routines. They adopted Law’s recommendations for "voluntary poverty, virginity, retirement, and devotion".¹⁴ This period of Wesley’s life was marked by a monastic-like rigor, involving fasting, early rising (4:00 AM), and a total abandonment of leisure.⁹ Law taught that authentic faith was evidenced by a "gospel of full devotion," which required a literal response to Christ’s mandates: feeding the hungry, visiting prisoners, and clothing the naked.² This practical divinity became the foundation of the Holy Club’s identity, providing the "methodical" approach from which they derived their name.¹⁰

The Soteriological Crisis: From Holy Living to Justifying Faith

The transition from endorsement to recantation was catalyzed by Wesley’s failed missionary journey to Georgia (1735–1737). Despite his strict adherence to Law’s principles, Wesley suffered from an acute lack of spiritual assurance.² On the voyage across the Atlantic, he encountered a group of Moravian Pietists whose calm confidence during life-threatening storms exposed the inadequacy of Wesley’s own "holy living" theology.² He realized that his efforts to "save his own soul" through Law’s rigorous ethics had not produced the "living faith" that transcends the fear of death.²

Upon returning to London in 1738, Wesley met the Moravian Peter Böhler, who challenged the very foundations of Law's influence. Böhler argued that salvation was not a prize to be earned through systematic devotion but a free gift of grace received through faith alone.² This realization was a turning point. Law’s model—which Wesley later called "philosophical religion"—emphasized the *preparation* of the human heart through self-denial.¹⁸ In contrast, the Moravian model emphasized the *instantaneous* work of God in justifying the sinner.¹⁴

Comparative Influence: William Law vs. Peter Böhler

Attribute	William Law (Oxford Period)	Peter Böhler (1738 Transition)
Spiritual Goal	Christian Perfection through self-mortification ⁹	Assurance of salvation through justifying faith ²
Role of Works	Necessary for the renewal of baptismal grace ²	Fruits of faith, not the cause of justification ²
Method of Faith	Gradual cultivation of a "holy temper" ³	Instantaneous delivery from sin and misery ¹⁴
Mentorship Style	The distant "Oracle" and instructor ³	The personal spiritual director and witness ²

The exchange of letters in May 1738 served as the formal notice of Wesley’s departure from Law’s tutelage. Wesley accused Law of not teaching him the "living, justifying faith" in the blood of Jesus, to which Law replied by asserting that his focus on "taking up the cross" was the only way to follow Christ truly.¹⁸ Law believed Wesley was making a theological error by separating the doctrine of the cross from the actual practice of following Christ.¹⁸ This breach set the stage for a lifetime of theological conflict.

The Mystical Turn: Law’s Engagement with Jacob Boehme

While Wesley moved toward the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith, William Law underwent a second major intellectual shift, moving from "practical divinity" to speculative mysticism.² In 1737, Law discovered the writings of the German cobbler-turned-mystic Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), whose complex cosmological and alchemical systems provided Law with a new language for describing the soul’s union with God.⁴

Boehme, often referred to as the "Teutonic Theosopher," claimed to have had visions that revealed the "hidden nature" of the universe and the divine.²⁵ Law found in Boehme a depth of insight that he believed illuminated the "reasonableness and the beauty of the Christian faith" beyond what the rationalism of his day could offer.²⁷ However, this "Behmenist" turn introduced several teachings that Wesley would eventually find "dangerously false" and "repugnant" to Scripture.⁵

Essential Behmenist Teachings Adopted by Law

- 1. The Seven Properties of Nature:** Boehme argued that nature is a "birth from the Deity"

structured by seven eternal properties or forms, which he associated with spiritual and physical dynamics such as "attraction," "resistance," "fire," and "light".²²

2. **The Absence of Divine Wrath:** Law argued that God is immutable Love and that "wrath" is not a property of God but a state of the fallen creature who has turned away from the divine light.¹³
3. **The Inward Christ (Divine Spark):** Law taught that every human soul contains a "seed of divine union" or a "divine spark" that must be "quickened" and "raised" into the life of God.³⁰
4. **Organic Redemption:** Redemption was viewed not as a forensic or legal act of pardon but as the organic "rebirth" of the Spirit of God within the human nature.²⁹
5. **Critique of Creation Ex Nihilo:** Law followed Boehme in suggesting that nature and creatures were "brought forth" from the divine essence rather than created out of nothing.²²

The 1756 Open Letter: Wesley's Comprehensive Recantation

The most significant document in the Wesley-Law controversy is Wesley's "A Letter to the Reverend Mr. Law," published in 1756. This was not a private correspondence but a public polemic intended to warn Methodists against the "dangerous tendency" of Law's later works.⁶ Wesley's recantation was based on four primary objections: Law's "unscriptural" philosophy, his denial of the traditional doctrine of the Atonement, his views on the nature of God, and his rejection of creation *ex nihilo*.²²

Critique of Behmenist Cosmology and "Seven Properties"

Wesley's letter began by acknowledging Law's earlier contributions but quickly moved into a logical dismantling of Behmenist terminology. Wesley ridiculed Law's claim that nature has "seven chief properties" because it is a "birth from the Deity".²² He challenged Law to define what he meant by terms like "the form of love" or "sound or understanding" as properties of nature, calling them a "jumbling of dissonant notions".²²

Wesley was particularly incensed by Law's attempt to synthesize theology with physical phenomena. Law had adopted Boehme's idea that "attraction is an incessant working of three contrary properties—drawing, resisting, and whirling".²² Wesley countered that this "discovery" was essentially meaningless and lacked any scriptural or logical proof, accusing Law of being "wise above that which is written".²²

Comparison of Behmenist Properties and Wesley's Critiques

Behmenist Property	Law's/Boehme's Definition	Wesley's Response/Critique
First Three	Drawing, Resisting, Whirling (Attraction) ²²	Senseless tautology; "Drawing is incessant drawing". ²²
Fourth (Fire)	The manifestation of divine energy in nature ²²	Hard to prove sin brought fire; darkness is not the ground of good. ²²
Fifth (Light/Love)	The "form" of divine light and love ²²	"Light and love" are not the same thing; terms are jumbled. ²²
Sixth (Sound)	Sound or Understanding as a property of nature ²²	Sound and understanding are distinctly different. ²²
Seventh (Life)	A life of triumphing joy ²²	Vague and speculative; lacking scriptural foundation. ²²

The Denial of Penal Substitutionary Atonement

The most profound theological disagreement between the two men concerned the mechanism of salvation. Wesley was a staunch defender of penal substitutionary atonement—the belief that Christ's death satisfied the requirements of divine justice and appeased the Father's wrath against sin.³³ Wesley argued that Law's later works, such as *The Spirit of Love*, attacked the very core of Christian identity by claiming there is "no wrath in God" and "no fictitious atonement".³⁴

For Law, the Atonement was a "moral influence" or a "restorative" process; Christ came to heal the diseased nature of humanity, not to satisfy a legal debt.¹³ Wesley countered that this view made God into a "soft" figure who could not maintain moral order.³⁴ He insisted that "the attribute of justice must be preserved inviolate," and that Law's rejection of this doctrine was tantamount to "denying the Lord that bought them".³⁴

The Nature of God: Wrath vs. Love

Law's mature theology posited that God is pure Love, and any scriptural references to God's "wrath" or "anger" are actually descriptions of the *human* experience of being separated from God.¹³ Law wrote that "God's providence... is doing the same thing as when he said... 'Let there be light'"—even when He is punishing or threatening.¹³ He believed that God's essence is

unchanging and cannot include negative emotions like resentment.¹³

Wesley viewed this as a dangerous abstraction. He believed that the "wrath of God" was a biblical reality and a necessary part of God's nature as a Holy Governor.³³ Wesley argued that if there is no wrath in God, then there is no need for propitiation, and Christ died in vain.³⁴ This dispute highlighted a fundamental difference in their "theology of the cross": Law saw the cross as the supreme example of God's restorative love, while Wesley saw it as the supreme satisfaction of God's righteous law.³⁴

The "Divine Spark" and the Rejection of Creation *ex nihilo*

A further point of conflict was the concept of the "divine spark" or the "seed of divine union" in man. Law taught that every person possesses an internal goodness that is "consubstantial with the uncreated ground of the Deity".³⁰ This led Law to a form of universalism, suggesting that God's all-redeeming love would eventually "melt all arrogance" and restore even the most destroyed sinners after ages of "fiery pain".¹³

Wesley found this concept of an internal "divine spark" to be a threat to the doctrine of total depravity. He argued that human nature is fallen and that any goodness must come from the *external* work of the Holy Spirit (prevenient grace), not an *innate* divine property.² Furthermore, Wesley attacked Law's claim that nature was a "birth from God," which implied that the universe was made of divine substance.²² Wesley upheld the classical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), arguing that Law's position jumbled the distinction between the Creator and the creature.²²

Later Polemics: "Thoughts upon Jacob Behmen"

Even in his final decades, Wesley remained concerned about Law's mystical influence. In 1780, he published "Thoughts upon Jacob Behmen" in his *Arminian Magazine*.⁴ This tract was essentially a compilation of the most critical sections of his 1756 letter. Wesley's goal was to provide a "rebutting defeater" to the growing popularity of Behmenism in England, which he feared would lead Methodists into "enthusiasm" and "quietism"—a state of spiritual passivity that neglected the outward means of grace.⁴

Wesley's late-life assessment of Law was a mixture of deep personal regret and theological condemnation. He continued to admire Law's early works for their "beauty and strength of language" and "accuracy of sentiment" regarding practical piety.²⁷ However, he treated Law's later mystical phase with "unmitigated disgust," calling Boehme a "madman" and his philosophy "fustian".⁸

Summary of Theological Differences (Wesley vs. Late Law)

Theological Category	John Wesley's Position	William Law's Late Position
Atonement	Penal Substitution; Satisfaction of Justice ³³	Restoration of Nature; Moral Influence ¹³
God's Nature	Holy Love; includes punitive justice ³³	Immutable Love; devoid of all wrath ¹³
Creation	Ex Nihilo (Out of Nothing) ²²	Birth from the Deity (Emanation) ²²
Human Nature	Totally Depraved; requires external grace ²	Divine Spark; innate "seed of union" ³⁰
Method of Salvation	Justifying Faith; Legal Pardon ²	Regeneration; Organic Rebirth ²⁹

Legacy and Implications of the Recantation

The breach between John Wesley and William Law had significant long-term consequences for the development of Methodism and the broader evangelical movement.

The Development of Methodist Soteriology

By recanting Law's mentorship, Wesley was forced to define "scriptural holiness" in a way that was distinct from both Anglican formalism and mystical quietism. Wesley successfully separated the *goal* of holiness (which he shared with Law) from the *means* of attaining it.¹⁴ For Wesley, Christian perfection was not a result of human effort or philosophical illumination, but was "nothing but the full kingdom in the Holy Ghost," received by faith and lived out in "practical divinity".¹⁰

The Rejection of "Enthusiasm" and Speculative Mysticism

Wesley's polemics against Law helped to inoculate the early Methodist movement against "enthusiasm"—the claim of direct, private revelations that bypassed Scripture and reason.⁸ Wesley insisted that a minister must have a "good understanding" and a "capacity of reasoning," using logic and metaphysics to defend the "plain, simple thing" of the Gospel against the "labyrinth" of mysticism.²²

The Enduring Value of Law's Early Works

Despite the severity of his recantation, Wesley never fully discarded Law's *Serious Call*. He continued to recommend it as a text for "awakening" sinners, even as he warned them against the theology of Law's later years.¹⁰ This created a unique legacy where William Law is remembered both as the "parent" of the Methodist revival and as one of its most formidable theological opponents.⁵

Conclusion

The relationship between John Wesley and William Law is a definitive case study in the evolution of eighteenth-century theology. Wesley's initial endorsement of Law was rooted in a shared commitment to a "holy living" tradition that sought to transcend the spiritual deadness of the age.¹ However, the historical record confirms that Wesley's endorsement was eventually recanted due to fundamental shifts in both men's thinking. Wesley moved toward a Reformation-based evangelicalism focused on justification by faith and penal substitution, while Law moved toward a speculative, Behmenist mysticism focused on internal restoration and the denial of divine wrath.²

The teachings that caused Wesley to renounce Law were specifically his adoption of Jacob Boehme's "seven properties of nature," his rejection of the traditional Atonement, and his concept of the "divine spark" in man—all of which Wesley believed were contrary to the "law and the testimony" of Scripture.¹³ Ultimately, Wesley's recantation was a necessary step in defining the Methodist identity as a movement that was "all devoted to God" but grounded firmly in the "plain, practical religion" of the Bible.⁹

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